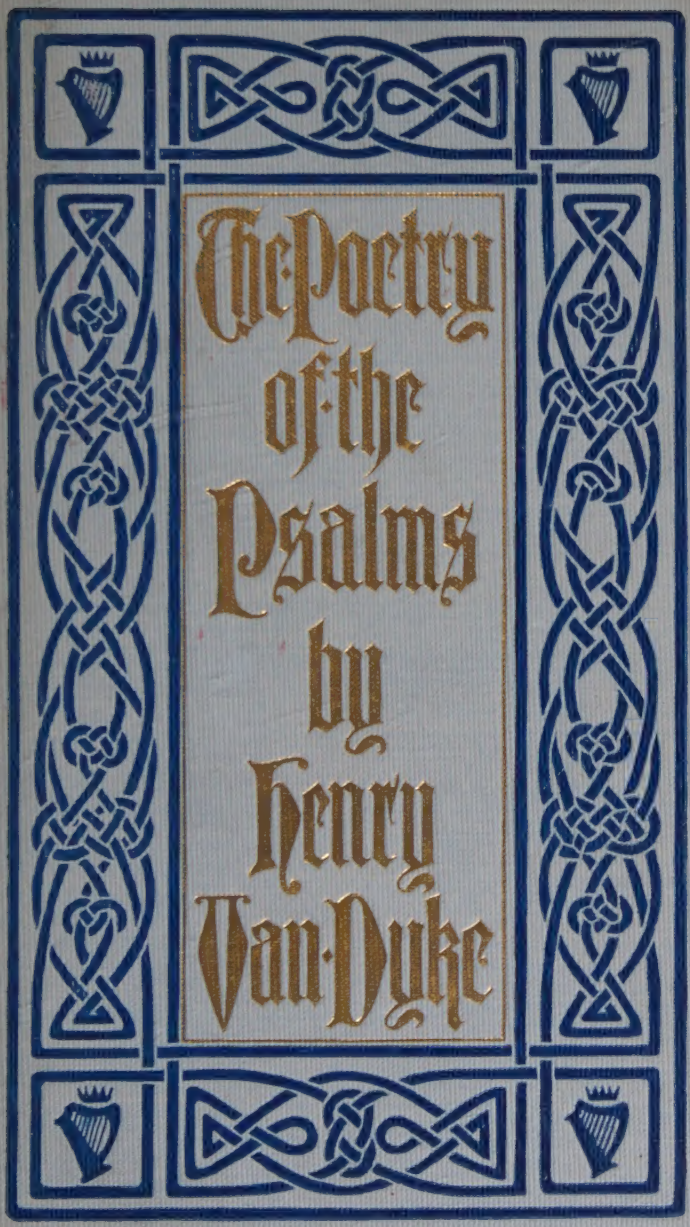
The Poetry of the Psalms by Henry Van Dyke

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THE POETRY OF THE PSALMS

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FOR READERS OF THE ENGLISH BIBLE

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T. Y. CROWELL AND COMPANY
PUBLISHERS, NEW YORK. MDCCCC

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D. B. Updike, The Merrymount Press, Boston

THE POETRY OF THE PSALMS

BY HENRY VAN DYKE

THIS little book is intended as a brief and simple introduction to the study of the Psalms, in English, as poetry. An Introduction

There are three ways in which we may study the Bible: as a revelation, as a document, and as literature. Three Ways to Study the Bible

We may study it as the divinely inspired and perfect rule of faith and conduct. This is the point of view from which it appears most precious. For this is what we need most of all: the word of God to teach us what to believe and how to live.

We may study it as a collection of historical books, written under certain conditions, and reflecting, in their contents and in their language, the circumstances in which they were produced. This is the aspect in which criticism regards the Bible; and its intellectual interest, as well as its religious value, is greatly enhanced by a clear vision of the truth about it from this point of view.

We may study it also as literature. We may see in it a noble and impassioned interpretation of nature and life, uttered in language of beauty and sublimity, touched with the vivid colours of

Harmony of these three Ways

human personality, and embodied in forms of enduring literary art.

None of these three ways of studying the Bible is hostile to the others. On the contrary, they are helpful to one another, because each of them gives us knowledge of a real factor in the marvellous influence of the Bible in the world.

True Love for the Bible is not Blind

The true lover of the Bible has an interest in all the elements of its life as an immortal book. He wishes to discern, and rightly to appreciate, the method of its history, the spirit of its philosophy, the significance of its fiction, the power of its eloquence, and the charm of its poetry. He wishes this all the more because he finds in it something which is not in any other book: a vision of God, a hope for man, and an inspiration to righteousness which are evidently divine. As the worshipper in the Temple would observe the art and structure of the carven beams of cedar and the lily-work on the tops of the pillars the more attentively because they beautified the house of his God, so the man who has a religious faith in the Bible will study more eagerly and carefully the literary forms of the book in which the Holy Spirit speaks forever.

The value of Poetry in the Psalms

We shall do wisely to consider and appreciate the poetical element in the Psalms. The comfort, help, and guidance that they bring to our spiritual life will not be diminished, but increased, by a perception of their exquisite form

and finish. If a king sent a golden cup full of cheering cordial to a weary man, he might well admire the twofold bounty of the royal gift. The beauty of the vessel would make the draught more grateful and refreshing. And if the cup were inexhaustible, if it filled itself anew as often as it touched the lips, then the very shape and adornment of it would become significant and precious. It would be an inestimable possession, a singing goblet, a treasure of life.

John Milton on the Psalms

John Milton, whose faith in religion was as exalted as his mastery of the art of poetry was perfect, has expressed in a single sentence the spirit in which I would approach the poetic study of the Book of Psalms: "Not in their divine arguments alone, but in the very critical art of composition, the Psalms may be easily made to appear over all kinds of lyric poetry incomparable."

I

Drawbacks to the Study of the Psalms in English

LET us remember at the outset that a considerable part of the value of the Psalms as poetry will lie beyond the reach of this essay. We cannot precisely measure it, nor give it a full appreciation, simply because we shall be dealing with the Psalms only as we have them in our English Bible. This is a real drawback; and it will be well to state clearly the two things that we lose in reading the Psalms in this way.

The Form of Verse is lost

First, we lose the beauty and the charm of verse. This is a serious loss. Poetry and verse are not the same thing, but they are so intimately related that it is difficult to divide them. Indeed, according to certain definitions of poetry, it would seem almost impossible.

Suppose, for example, that we accept this definition: "Poetry is that variety of the Literature of Emotion which is written in metrical form."* How, then, can we have poetry when the form is not metrical?

* Principles of Literary Criticism. C. T. Winchester. Page 232.

Yet who will deny that the Psalms as we have them in the English Bible are really and truly poetry?

The only way out of this difficulty that I can see is to distinguish between verse as the for-

mal element and rhythmical emotion as the essential element in poetry. In the original production of a poem, it seems to me, it is just to say that the embodiment in metrical language is a law of art which must be observed. But in the translation of a poem (which is a kind of reflection of it in a mirror) the verse may be lost without altogether losing the poem.

Relation of Poetry to Verse

Take an illustration from another art. A statue has the symmetry of solid form. You can look at it from all sides, and from every side you can see the balance and rhythm of the parts. In a photograph this solidity of form disappears. You see only a flat surface. But you still recognize it as the reflection of a statue.

The Psalms were undoubtedly written, in the original Hebrew, according to a system of versification, and perhaps to some extent with forms of rhyme.

Hebrew Versification

The older scholars, like Lowth and Herder, held that such a system existed, but could not be recovered. Later scholars, like Ewald, evolved a system of their own. Modern scholarship, represented by such authors as Professors Cheyne and Briggs, is reconstructing and explaining more accurately the Hebrew versification. But, for the present at least, the only thing that is clear is that this system must remain obscure to us. It cannot be reproduced in English. The metrical versions of the Psalms are the least

Metrical Versions

satisfactory. The poet Cowley said of them, "They are so far from doing justice to David that methinks they revile him worse than Shimei."* We must learn to appreciate the poetry of the Psalms without the aid of those symmetries of form and sound in which they first appeared. This is a serious loss. Poetry without verse is still poetry, but it is like a bride without a bridal garment.

* The Works of Mr. Abraham Cowley. 3 vols. London, 1710. Preface to Pindarique Odes. Volume i, page 184.

The Shading of the Original Language is lost

The second thing that we lose in reading the Psalms in English is something even more important. It is the heavy tax on the wealth of its meaning, which all poetry must pay when it is imported from one country to another, through the medium of translation.

The power of Association in Words

The most subtle charm of poetry is its suggestiveness; and much of this comes from the magical power which words acquire over memory and imagination, from their associations. This intimate and personal charm must be left behind when a poem passes from one language to another. The accompaniment, the harmony of things remembered and beloved, which the very words of the song once awakened, is silent now. Nothing remains but the naked melody of thought. If this is pure and strong, it will gather new associations; as, indeed, the Psalms have already done in English, so that their familiar expressions have become charged with musi-

cal potency. And yet I suppose such phrases as "a tree planted by the streams of water," "a fruitful vine in the innermost parts of the house," "the mountains round about Jerusalem," can never bring to us the full sense of beauty, the enlargement of heart, that they gave to the ancient Hebrews.

The power of Association in Words

But, in spite of this double loss, in the passage from verse to prose and from Hebrew to English, the poetry of the Psalms is so real and vital and imperishable that every reader feels its beauty and power.

The Poetry survives this Twofold loss

It retains one valuable element of poetic form. This is that balancing of the parts of a sentence, one against another, to which Bishop Lowth first gave the familiar name of "parallelism."* The effect of this simple artifice, learned from Nature herself, is singularly pleasant and powerful. It is the rise and fall of the fountain, the ebb and flow of the tide, the tone and overtone of the chiming bell. The twofold utterance seems to bear the thought onward like the wings of a bird. A German writer compares it very exquisitely to "the heaving and sinking of the troubled heart."

One element of Poetic Form retained

* Lowth. De Sacra Poesi Hebræorum Prælectiones. Oxon., 1753.

It is this "parallelism" which gives such a familiar charm to the language of the Psalms.

Thought-Rhyme

Unconsciously, and without recognizing the nature of the attraction, we grow used to the double cadence, the sound and the echo, and learn to look for its recurrence with delight.

O come let us sing unto the Lord;
Let us make a joyful noise to the rock of our salvation,
Let us come before his presence with thanksgiving;
And make a joyful noise unto him with psalms.

If we should want a plain English name for this method of composition we might call it thought-rhyme. It is easy to find varied illustrations of its beauty and of its power to emphasize large and simple ideas.

Psalm I. The Two Paths

Take for instance that very perfect psalm with which the book begins — a poem so complete, so compact, so delicately wrought that it seems like a sonnet. The subject is The Two Paths.

The Path of Peace

The first part describes the way of the good man. It has three divisions.

The first verse gives a description of his conduct by negatives — telling us what he does not do. There is a triple thought-rhyme here.

Blessed is the man that walketh not in the counsel of the ungodly,
Nor standeth in the way of sinners,
Nor sitteth in the seat of the scornful.

The second verse describes his character positively, with a double thought-rhyme.

But his delight is in the law of Jehovah;
And in his law doth he meditate day and night.

The third verse tells us the result of this character and conduct, in a four-fold thought-rhyme.

He shall be like a tree planted by the rivers of
water:
That bringeth forth his fruit in his season:
His leaf also shall not wither:
And whatsoever he doeth shall prosper.

The second part of the psalm describes the way of the evil man. In the fourth verse there is a double thought-rhyme.

The ungodly are not so:
But are like the chaff which the wind driveth
away.

In the fifth verse the consequences of this worthless, fruitless, unrooted life are shown, again with a double cadence of thought, the first referring to the judgment of God, the second to the judgment of men.

Therefore the ungodly shall not stand in the
judgment:
Nor sinners in the congregation of the right-
eous.

The third part of the psalm is a terse, powerful couplet, giving the reason for the different ending of the two paths.

For Jehovah knoweth the way of the righteous:
But the way of the ungodly shall perish.

The thought-rhyme here is one of contrast.

Psalm XLVI. A National Anthem

A poem of very different character from this brief, serious, impersonal sonnet is found in the Forty-sixth Psalm, which might be called a national anthem. Here again the poem is divided into three parts.

National Faith

The first part (verses first to third) expresses a sense of joyful confidence in the Eternal, amid the tempests and confusions of earth. The thought-rhymes are in couplets; and the second phrase, in each case, emphasizes and enlarges the idea of the first phrase.

God is our refuge and strength:
A very present help in trouble.

National Security

The second part (verses fourth to seventh) describes the peace and security of the city of God, surrounded by furious enemies, but rejoicing in the Eternal Presence. The parallel phrases here follow the same rule as in the first part. The concluding phrase is the stronger, the more emphatic. The seventh verse gives the refrain or chorus of the anthem.

The Lord of hosts is with us:
The God of Jacob is our refuge.

National Deliverance

The last part (verses eighth to tenth) describes in a very vivid and concrete way the deliverance of the people that have trusted in the Eternal. It begins with a couplet, like those which have gone before. Then follow two stanzas of triple thought-rhymes, in which the thought is stated and intensified with each repetition.

He maketh wars to cease unto the end of the earth:
He breaketh the bow, and cutteth the spear in sunder:
He burneth the chariot in the fire.

National Deliverance

Be still, and know that I am God:
I will be exalted among the heathen:
I will be exalted in the earth.

The anthem ends with a repetition of the chorus.

A careful study of the Psalms, even in English, will enable the thoughtful reader to derive new pleasure from them, by tracing the many modes and manners in which this poetic form of thought-rhyme is used to bind the composition together, and to give balance and harmony to the poem.

A Suggestion for Study

Another element of poetic form can be discerned in the Psalms, not directly, in the English version, but by its effects. I mean the curious artifice of alphabetic arrangement. It was a favourite practice among Hebrew poets to begin their verses with the successive letters of the alphabet, or sometimes to vary the device by making every verse in a strophe begin with one letter, and every verse in the next strophe with the following letter, and so on to

Alphabetic Psalms

Alphabetic Psalms

the end. The Twenty-fifth and the Thirty-seventh Psalms were written by the first of these rules; the One Hundred and Nineteenth Psalm follows the second plan.

Of course the alphabetic artifice disappears entirely in the English translation. But its effects remain. The Psalms written in this manner usually have but a single theme, which is repeated over and over again, in different words and with new illustrations. They are kaleidoscopic. The material does not change, but it is turned this way and that way, and shows itself in new shapes and arrangements. These alphabetic psalms are characterized by poverty of action and richness of expression.

II

ILTON has already reminded us that the Psalms belong to the second of the three orders into which the Greeks, with clear discernment, divided all poetry: the epic, the lyric, and the dramatic. The Psalms are rightly called lyrics because they are chiefly concerned with the immediate and imaginative expression of real feeling. It is the personal and emotional note that predominates. They are inward, confessional, intense; outpourings of the quickened spirit; self-revelations of the heart. It is for this reason that we should never separate them in our thought from the actual human life out of which they sprang. We must feel the warm pulse of humanity in them in order to comprehend their meaning and eternal worth. So far as we can connect them with the actual experience of men, this will help us to appreciate their reality and power. The effort to do this will make plain to us some other things which it is important to remember.

Lyrical Quality of the Psalms

We shall see at once that the book does not come from a single writer, but from many authors and ages. It represents the heart of man in communion with God through a thousand years of history, from Moses to Nehemiah, per-

Many Authors

The Note of Brotherhood

haps even to the time of the Maccabæan revival. It is, therefore, something very much larger and better than an individual book.

It is the golden treasury of lyrics gathered from the life of the Hebrew people. And this gives to it a singular and precious quality of brotherhood. The fault, or at least the danger, of modern lyrical poetry is that it is too solitary and separate in its tone. It tends toward exclusiveness, over-refinement, morbid sentiment. Many Christian hymns suffer from this defect. But the Psalms breathe a spirit of human fellowship even when they are most intensely personal. The poet rejoices or mourns in solitude, it may be, but not alone. He is one of the people. He is conscious always of the ties that bind him to his brother men. Compare the intense selfishness of the modern hymn:

I can but perish if I go;
I am resolved to try;
For if I stay away, I know
I shall forever die,

with the generous penitence of the Fifty-first Psalm:

Then will I teach transgressors thy way;
And sinners shall be converted unto thee.

It is important to observe that there are several different kinds of lyrics among the Psalms. Some of them are simple and natural outpourings of a single feeling, like A Shepherd's

Song about His Shepherd, in the incomparable Twenty-third Psalm.

Psalm XXIII. A pure Lyric

This little poem is a perfect melody. It would be impossible to express a pure, unmixed emotion—the feeling of joy in the Divine Goodness—more simply, more sweetly, with a more penetrating lyrical charm. The "valley of the death-shade," the "enemies" in whose presence the table is spread, are but dimly suggested in the background. The atmosphere of the psalm is clear and bright. The singing shepherd walks in light. The whole world is the House of the Lord, and life is altogether gladness.

Psalm CXIX. An Ode to Duty

How different is the tone, the quality of the One Hundred and Nineteenth Psalm! This is not a melody, but a harmony; not a song, but an ode. The ode has been defined as "a strain of exalted and enthusiastic lyrical verse, directed to a fixed purpose and dealing progressively with one dignified theme."* This definition precisely fits the One Hundred and Nineteenth Psalm.

* English Odes, selected by Edmund Gosse. Preface, page xiii.

Its theme is The Eternal Word. Every verse in the poem, except one, contains some name or description of the law, commandments, testimonies, precepts, statutes, or judgments of Jehovah. Its enthusiasm for the Divine Righteousness never fails from beginning to end. Its fixed purpose is to kindle in other hearts

Psalm CXIX. An Ode to Duty

the flame of devotion to the one Holy Law. It closes with a touch of magnificent pathos—a confession of personal failure and an assertion of spiritual loyalty:

I have gone astray like a lost sheep:
Seek thy servant:
For I do not forget thy commandments.

Psalm XV. The Good Citizen

The Fifteenth Psalm I should call a small, didactic lyric. Its title is The Good Citizen. It begins with a question:

Jehovah, who shall abide in thy tabernacle?
Who shall dwell in thy holy hill?

This question is answered by the description of a man whose character corresponds to the law of God. First there is a positive sketch in three broad lines:

He that walketh uprightly,
And worketh righteousness,
And speaketh truth in his heart.

Then comes a negative characterization in a finely touched triplet:

He that backbiteth not with his tongue,
Nor doeth evil to his neighbour,
Nor taketh up a reproach against his neighbour.

This is followed by a couplet containing a strong contrast:

In whose eyes a vile person is contemned:
But he honoureth them that fear Jehovah.

Then the description goes back to the negative

style again and three more touches are added to the picture:

Psalm XV. The Good Citizen

He that sweareth to his own hurt and changeth not,
He that putteth not out his money to usury,
Nor taketh reward against the innocent.

The poem closes with a single vigorous line, summing up the character of the good citizen and answering the question of the first verse with a new emphasis of security and permanence.

Doing these things, he shall never be moved.

The Seventy-eighth, One Hundred and Fifth, and One Hundred and Sixth Psalms are lyrical ballads. They tell the story of Israel in Egypt, and in the Wilderness, and in Canaan, with swift, stirring phrases, and with splendid flashes of imagery. Take this passage from the Seventy-eighth Psalm as an example:

Lyrical Ballads

He clave the rocks in the wilderness,
And gave them drink out of the great depths.

He brought streams also out of the rock,
And caused waters to run down like rivers.

And they sinned yet more against him,
Provoking the Most High in the wilderness.

They tempted God in their hearts,
Asking meat for their lust.

Yea, they spake against God:
They said, can God furnish a table in the wilderness?

Behold, he smote the rock that the waters gushed out,
And the streams overflowed;
Can he give bread also?
Can he provide flesh for his people?

Therefore Jehovah heard and was wroth:
So a fire was kindled against Jacob,
And anger also came up against Israel:
Because they believed not in God,
And trusted not in his salvation:

Though he had commanded the clouds from above,
And opened the doors of heaven,
And had rained down manna upon them to eat,
And had given them of the corn of heaven,
Man did eat angels' food:

He sent them meat to the full.
He caused an east wind to blow in the heaven,
And by his power he brought in the south wind.
He rained flesh also upon them as dust,
And feathered fowls like as the sand of the sea.

And he let it fall in the midst of their camp,
Round about their habitations;
So they did eat and were filled,
For he gave them their own desire.

They were not estranged from their lust: Lyrical Ballads
But while the meat was yet in their mouths,
The wrath of God came upon them, and slew
the fattest of them,
And smote down the chosen men of Israel.

The Forty-fifth Psalm is a Marriage Ode: the Hebrew title calls it a Love Song. It bears all the marks of having been composed for some royal wedding-feast in Jerusalem.

There are many nature lyrics among the Psalms. The Twenty-ninth is notable for its rugged realism. It is a Song of Thunder.

The voice of the Lord breaketh the cedars: Nature Lyrics
Yea, the Lord breaketh the cedars of Lebanon:
He maketh them also to skip like a calf:
Lebanon and Sirion like a young unicorn.

The One Hundred and Fourth, on the contrary, is full of calm sublimity and meditative grandeur.

Jehovah, my God, thou art very great:
Thou art clothed with honour and majesty:

Who coverest thyself with light as with a garment;
Who stretchest out the heavens like a curtain.

The Nineteenth is famous for its splendid comparison between "the starry heavens and the moral law."

I think that we may find also some dramatic

Dramatic Lyrics

lyrics among the Psalms—poems composed to express the feelings of an historic person, like David or Solomon, in certain well-known and striking experiences of his life. That a later writer should thus embody and express the truth dramatically through the personality of some great hero of the past, involves no falsehood. It is a mode of utterance which has been common to the literature of all lands and of all ages. Such a method of composition would certainly be no hindrance to the spirit of inspiration. The Thirty-first Psalm, for instance, is ascribed by the title to David. But there is strong reason, in the phraseology and in the spirit of the poem, to believe that it was written by the Prophet Jeremiah.

III

IT is not to be supposed that our reverence for the Psalms in their moral and religious aspects will make us put them all on the same level poetically. There is a difference among the books of the New Testament in regard to the purity and dignity of the Greek in which they are written. There is a difference among St. Paul's Epistles in regard to the clearness and force of their style. There is a difference even among the chapters of the same epistle in regard to the beauty of thought and language. In the First Epistle to the Corinthians, the thirteenth chapter is poetic, and the fourteenth is prosaic. Why should there not be a difference in poetic quality among the Psalms?

Psalms Differ in Poetic Value

There is a difference. The honest reader will recognize it. It will be no harm to him if he should have his favourites among the poems which have been gathered from many centuries into this great collection.

There are some, like the Twenty-seventh, the Forty-second, the Forty-sixth, the Fifty-first, the Sixty-third, the Ninety-first, the Ninety-sixth, the One Hundred and Third, the One

Excellent Psalms

Excellent Psalms

Hundred and Seventh, the One Hundred and Thirty-ninth, which are among the noblest poems of the world. Others move on a lower level, and show the traces of effort and constraint. There are also manifest alterations and interpolations, which are not always improvements. Dr. Perowne, who is one of the wisest and most conservative of modern commentators, says, "Many of the Psalms have not come down to us in their original form,"* and refers to the alterations which the Seventieth makes in the Fortieth, and the Fifty-third in the Fourteenth. The last two verses of the Fifty-first were evidently added by a later hand. The whole book, in its present form, shows the marks of its compilation and use as the Hymn-Book of the Jewish people. Not only in the titles, but also in the text, we can discern the work of the compiler, critic, and adapter, sometimes wise, but occasionally otherwise.

* The Book of Psalms. 2 volumes, London, 1883. Volume i, page 82.

IV

THE most essential thing in the appreciation of the poetry of the Psalms is the recognition of the three great spiritual qualities which distinguish it, and are the evidences, not only of genius, but also of inspiration. Three Qualities of Surpassing Value in Poetry

The first of these is the deep and genuine love of nature. The psalmists delight in the vision of the world, and their joy quickens their senses to read alike the larger hieroglyphs of glory written in the stars and the delicate tracings of transient beauty on leaf and flower; to hear alike the mighty roaring of the sea and the soft sweet laughter of the rustling cornfields. But in all these they see and hear the handwriting and the voice of God. It is His presence that makes the world sublime and beautiful. The direct, piercing, elevating sense of this presence simplifies, enlarges, and ennobles their style, and makes it different from other nature-poetry. They never lose themselves, like Theocritus and Wordsworth and Shelley and Tennyson, in the contemplation and description of natural beauty. They see it, but they always see beyond it. Compare, for example, a modern versified translation with the Psalm itself: The Love of Nature

The Love of Nature

The spacious firmament on high, ❀ Joseph Addison, 1712.
With all the blue ethereal sky
And spangled heavens, a shining frame,
Their Great Original proclaim.❀

Addison's descriptive epithets betray a conscious effort to make a splendid picture. But the psalmist felt no need of this; a larger impulse lifted him at once into "the grand style":

The heavens declare the glory of God;
And the firmament showeth his handiwork.

Moral Enthusiasm

The second quality of the poetry of the Psalms is their passionate sense of the beauty of holiness. Keats was undoubtedly right in his suggestion that the poet must always see truth in the form of beauty. Otherwise he may be a philosopher, or a critic, or a moralist, but he is not a true poet. But we must go on from this standpoint to the Platonic doctrine that the highest form of beauty is spiritual and ethical. It is the harmony of the soul with the eternal music of the Good. And the highest poets are those who, like the psalmists, are most ardently enamoured of righteousness. This fills their songs with sweetness and fire incomparable and immortal:

The fear of the Lord is clean, enduring for ever:
The judgments of the Lord are true and righteous altogether.

More to be desired are they than gold, yea, than much fine gold:
Sweeter also than honey and the honeycomb.

Joy in God

The third quality of the poetry of the Psalms is their intense joy in God. No lover ever poured out the longings of his heart towards his mistress more eagerly than David voiced his desire and thirst for God. No conqueror ever sang of victory more exultantly than David rejoiced in the Lord, who was his light and his salvation, the strength of his life and his portion forever.

After all, the true mission of poetry is to increase joy. It must, indeed, be sensitive to sorrow and acquainted with grief. But it has wings given to it in order that it may bear us up into the ether of gladness.

There is no perfect joy without love. Therefore love-poetry is the best. But the highest of all love-poetry is that which celebrates, with the Psalms,

"that Love which is and was
My Father and my Brother and my God."

Designed and printed by D. B. Updike,
The Merrymount Press, Boston